
A Drastically Different Analysis

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After examining Ronald Child's appeal to reconsider the case for mainstreaming mentally retarded persons, I'm tempted to retell the familiar story about the blind men and the elephant. It occurs so often that I wonder why I am always surprised when I find two reasonably informed professionals arriving at such entirely different viewpoints concerning what's going on in our field. Especially when I'm one of them is such an occurrence not only surprising but irksome. The temptation is to approach opposition with the attitude that the other fellow is hopelessly confused, but then of course I would fail to take the opposition seriously and, thus, not deal with it. But after all is said and done, it's usually a case of different values and objectives. But it's usually also a case of points missed, mislaid, or mistaken. Now it will be up to the reader to

figure out what the right values are and who's seeing things correctly—that is, who's seen things the way the reader has.

It's Childs' thesis that a drastic change has taken place in the schooling of educable mentally retarded persons. And furthermore, the change has been unnoticed in the professional literature. I disagree. There has been a drastic change, but it has hardly touched educational programs for retarded children. Contrary to Childs' claim, the change has been in the literature and, especially, in the language of our field. When once we spoke and wrote about special classes, special schools, institutions, special certificates, more and more specialized training, and different programs for different people, we speak and write today about mainstreaming, normalization, deinstitutionalization,

least restrictive environment, zero reject, equal opportunities, and Public Law 94-142 (which encompasses all of the aforementioned and a good deal more). The language concerning mental retardation has surely changed and, as Tom Szasz has taught us so well, in the long run our language determines our policies and actions. Consequently, while hardly anything has changed for the children, almost everything has changed in the way we think about mental retardation. Therefore, it appears as if drastic change has not taken place in the education of the retarded, but probably will occur during the coming decade.

Why are programs for mentally retarded persons more or less like they've been for the past twenty or thirty years? We've spent millions on curriculum research and billions on other related programs. Classes and teachers have proliferated at an astonishing rate. Even the man and woman in the street seem to know something about the needs of our mentally retarded citizens. One would think that a drastic change has taken place, but it seems to be that the more things have changed the more they have remained the same, but they seem to remain the same in a different manner today than the way they once remained the same. How come? Certifications have hardly changed. State and local funding patterns have hardly changed. And colleges and universities have changed not at all. So curricula haven't changed. Neither have methods nor structures changed, one probable reason being that, while content dominates the higher grades, lower grades methods and structures (how we teach and where) accommodate to integrated as easily as segregated programs. Add to the above the now well-documented fact that teachers' unions are holding fast to the status quo and that the "special education monolith" is beginning to have second thoughts about the mainstreaming movement and you have a situation where talk is not only cheap but good for the soul while action is expensive and bad for one's job security.

Of course, as Childs points out there have been over the years certain modest changes, when special education moved from "watered down" regular class curricula to curricula emphasizing practical skills for independent living. However, having lived through that exciting period, I can assure him that there never was a time in our country when a widespread curriculum for the mentally retarded was actually different than the average curriculum for regular class children. Yes, such was the intention of Dick Hungerford and his colleagues in New York City, but to everyone connected with that great experiment it was well known that few outside that

small group were imbued with the dedication and skills to make Occupational Education work. And few indeed tried to make the Illinois Plan work. And probably few are now going all out to give Herbert Goldstein's Social Learning Curriculum a chance. Childs mentioned some of our important contemporary curriculum leaders. Each of those had ideological progenitors. It's my impression that Kolstoe and Goldstein's was Hungerford, and his were Alice Metzner and Elizabeth Farrell. It's my impression that Godfrey Stevens' inspiration came from Florence Stratemeyer. It's clear that we've never suffered from a scarcity of curriculum theories and plans, yet it hasn't seemed to matter. However, the point I'm trying to make isn't that one curriculum is as good as another, but that whether integration of the schools is successful or not has little to do with the objective development of the so-called "best" curriculum, or best methods, or best administrative design. The point I am trying to make is that people who want handicapped children in the mainstream should make that decision on the strength of their values or, to be specific, on how much they want their society integrated.

Childs briefly discussed the so-called efficacy studies and admits difficulty in pinpointing the origination of research contrasting mentally retarded children in regular and special classes. The first two such studies that I was able to locate were done by Bennett in Baltimore in 1932, and by Pertsch in New York City in 1936. It's possible that I did the first post-World War II efficacy study in 1955-56. Since that time, there have been many such examinations and, to be frank, considering the numbers of people involved and the considerable expense of some of those studies, we didn't seem to learn from them as much as might have been expected.

Childs made the point that mainstreaming programs grew because of criticisms of special classes for not enhancing academic development. His observation can be faulted. It is my impression that the mainstreaming movement grew out of the civil rights movement, out of concern for the right of all people to enjoy educational opportunities and in as normal a societal structure as possible. For example, there is little objective justification for kindergartens, junior year abroad, or college itself if such programs need to be based on enhanced academic achievement. Living in a normal world is simply thought to be good for retarded children, as we think it's good for us.

Childs asked for the evidence to substantiate the idea that mentally retarded children will fare better in life because they were placed in regular classes.

On the surface, it sounds like a reasonable request. But really, who should make it? The burden to provide evidence should be on those advocating the atypical placement, the special class, and not on those supporting the natural placement, the regular class. The fact is that such evidence has been rare and never conclusive.

Possibly one of the problems Childs couldn't deal with was his synonymous use of the terms "special class" and "special education." Furthermore, his conclusion that mentally retarded children are not normal may have restricted his vision of a different societal structure. And of course, his apparent belief that the AAMD definition of mental retardation is now widely applied in the schools inhibits his understanding of exactly who comprise special classes for educable children.

Almost 30 years ago I came into the field of mental retardation, not knowing very much about mentally retarded persons and knowing even less about such issues as nature-nurture, integration-segregation, and curability-incurability. And although I must admit that neither I nor my betters in the field have yet to lay those puzzling problems by their heels, I now have a perspective if for no other reason than that I've lived through and observed a period of great activity on behalf of mentally retarded persons. When I came into this field as a protégé of Richard Hungerford, then director of the largest public school system for mentally retarded persons in the world, our intent was to develop a national curriculum for mildly mentally retarded persons. It was a program based on the concept that these youngsters have contributions to make to society, but that they would not achieve their potential without the advantages of a different developmental curriculum, (occupationally oriented, and supervised by trained teachers). During those years, I was joined with the most distinguished, altruistic and gifted colleagues one could hope to have. But today, most of those people would be classified as traditional, at best, and racist by those who did not know them. We were then convinced that the educable child needed a separate special training program, and that the trainable child needed an even greater degree of habit training of the most elemental kind, the latter program to be conducted sometimes in a special school or institution. We were a zealous lot, banded together by confidence in each other and in the correctness of our position. As Hungerford taught us, in the end even happiness will fail. In the end, each individual—gifted and the most limited—must find a meaningful relationship with other human beings, must develop a realistic understanding of himself,

and must be prepared to serve society in a responsible if limited manner. In 1949, I was totally committed to segregated special programs in the public schools. And although I knew too little about them, in 1949 I was totally supportive of what I then called the decent institutions for those mentally retarded persons who were unable to live in the ordinary community.

Many things change in thirty years. Hungerford is gone, but I think his views concerning segregated programs softened somewhat before his death. Many of those earlier leaders whom we had relied upon are also gone. And of course, some of our newer leaders have brought different perspectives. Since that time when I first read Dick Hungerford's eloquent essays on brotherhood, on our needs for each other, and on facing a world that demands black and white answers when grey is the only true answer, I've engaged in my own studies and have written my own papers and books. Since that time when I accepted responsibility as a special class teacher, I took it upon myself to study the effectiveness of such classes. Since that time when I required my students to attend clinic days at the state institution, I took it upon myself to examine an institution for mentally retarded persons, and then another, and still another, until I had examined more than a hundred such places. So while nothing seems to have changed for the children who are called mentally retarded, everything seems to have changed for me. While I was once a segregator and proud of it, I now see how foolish it all was.

Research has nothing to do with whether we should continue the practice of segregating mentally retarded people. That's a question that requires more than merely assigning funds for people to figure out how to teach this skill or overcome that deficit. But it also requires less. In this situation, research can't tell us how we could better live our lives. If America wants to integrate its mentally retarded, crippled, blind, and deaf, and elderly citizens, it need merely to pledge itself to that idea. It is a case where we can get exactly what we deserve merely by willing it.

References

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